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PSI PHENOMENA IN SEARCH OF A
NEURAL FOOTHOLD

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In neurological language "cerebral localization" means assigning certain mental functions to a specific area in the brain. I submit that our attempts to "localize" psi phenomena have until recently been bogged down because we were asking the wrong questions. Instead of trying to pinpoint the origin of ESP or PK in a given brain region, we must ask what it is that *prevents* our system from being flooded by the steady influx of psi stimuli from the past, the present and the future all the time.

I believe, furthermore, that we must not throw two disparate classes of psi into one basket: namely, (1) spontaneous incidents of the type seen in crises, dreams, trance states or the psychoanalytic situation—I would describe these as *need-determined*—and, (2) experimental, forced-choice incidents of the card-guessing type. They are of trivial, indifferent nature, possess no survival advantage, and I would describe them as *flaw-determined*.

Focusing on flaw-determined phenomena, we can take H. Bergson's filter theory as our point of departure. This leads us to the reticular formation in the brain stem as the structure which protects the organism from being flooded by excessive stimulation from both inside and outside: from sensory as well as extrasensory overload—including subliminal perceptions. I suggest that the same regulatory function acts as a brake on the uncontrolled and indiscriminate release of motor impulses that, if unchecked, would wreak havoc in our social and physical environment. In the end, it would exhaust the person's energy supply like a Roman candle. Two clinical examples illustrate the point. One is a paranoid schizophrenic's delusion of drowning in a sea of social hostility; the other is a poltergeist child's explosive acting-out of his pent-up destructive impulses.

How then do these considerations apply to typical ESP-card tests—the forced-choice type of psi phenomena? They suggest that the capriciousness of correct hits in such experiments is due to the random occurrence of minor flaws in the reticular formation's screening or inhibitory functions. These random flaws permit a few equally capricious bursts of psi to intrude into the subject's scoring pattern. This is why I describe these psi effects as *flaw-determined*.

However, this hypothesis cannot account for the emergence and central brain processing of those major, need-determined psi experiences which occur in dreams, crises, in the psychoanalytic situation or in telepathic drawings. Such incidents involve mental events of a highly complex nature, and they merit the special consideration

random firing of a few reticular-formation neurons caught napping on their jobs. This point is illustrated by the much-quoted Warcollier and Upton Sinclair telepathic drawing tests, and the Urban-Krippner dream experiments. Here the emergence of psi requires specific selection and elaborate processing in higher brain centers.

Turning to such need determined phenomena gives us an added clue about the operation of psi in general. Let us put telepathic drawings side by side with drawings made by brain-injured patients suffering from lesions in the left hemisphere. We are struck by a close resemblance between the two. Both show a marked distortion and disorganization of the picture—indeed skeptics, for this very reason, tend to scoff at the poor quality of the average telepathic drawing. However, it is just this distortion which sheds new light on the telepathic process itself. The disorganization characteristic of psi phenomena suggests that the telepathic percipient functions in much the same way as does a brain-injured patient with a lesion in the left parieto-occipital region. Neurologically speaking, he suffers from optic agnosia: although his vision is unimpaired, he is unable to make sense of his visual perceptions. The best such patient can do is to process them, however poorly, with his (intact) *right* hemisphere.

If this is true, the conclusion is at hand that the telepathic percipient's groping efforts to make sense of the ESP target likewise call on the imprints of the *right* hemisphere—the intellectually "inferior," but intuitively more perceptive side of the brain. In his drawings or other ESP productions, the normal subject shows the same tendency to distortion, disorganization and right-left reversal as does the patient with disturbances of the left parieto-occipital region.

This fact lends added support to the proposition that it is



the right hemisphere which presides over the processing of emotional stimuli, while the reticular formation serves as a screen protecting the person from being flooded and overwhelmed by either need- or flow-determined experiences or by both.

To sum up: psi phenomena have their neural foothold on two levels of the central nervous system: one in the brain stem, the other in the brain cortex. The emergence of a given psi incident depends on minor irregularities in the functioning of the reticular formation, coupled with the compensatory functioning of the right hemisphere.

Note: A previous version of this article appeared in the *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, Vol. 161, No. 6, 1975. A fuller statement will also be included in Dr. Ehrenwald's forthcoming book, *PARAPSYCHIATRY: A STUDY OF PSI FUNCTIONS AND DYSFUNCTIONS*.

ASPR HELPS WITH AN INTERSESSION SYMPOSIUM

During January 1976 an Intersession symposium on parapsychology was held at Ladycliff College, Highland Falls, N.Y. for undergraduates there. It was initiated and coordinated by Timothy Revers of the Psychology Department. Several people connected with the ASPR participated as lecturers and consultants. Since this was the first time parapsychology had been extensively covered in a course at Ladycliff, we asked Mr. Revers to make some comments.

What were your major purposes in making this course available?

Partly to respond to the students' great interest and curiosity. Also I believe that such programs, if handled well, can help get parapsychology into mainstream higher education, where it has for too long been slighted.

How did you go about getting it included on the Intersession program?

Many colleges use the January Intersession (a short term between Fall and Spring terms) to introduce innovative and experimental programs. Ladycliff's program is very flexible; so there was no problem introducing a two-credit course entitled "The Psychic Scene: An Introduction to Parapsychology."

Did the faculty show interest? The administration?

To my delight the announcement of the course was met with genuine excitement by many people in the College community, including members of the psychology, philosophy, history and art departments. While many expressed only slight familiarity with the research being done, they were receptive to broadening our knowledge in this dimension of man. Our president, Dr. Francis J. Breidenback, especially encouraged me by his continuing interest in the program's progress.

What point of view did you stress?

Both an experiential and a research approach were taken. In discussing each topic we usually began by presenting several case studies and then progressed to a review of the research in that area. At midpoint in the two weeks, some classroom ESP experiments were conducted, with results suggestive of marked psychic ability in one student at least. At the end of the program, Dr. Parimal Das

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informally encouraged students to share their personal psychic experiences. With the course background behind them, this proved to be a successful session. In collaboration with the ASPR, I put together an exhibit of photos with captions. It showed various aspects of recent research, and drew considerable attention when displayed in one of the college hallways.

How did the students react?

Though, when the course was announced, many students apparently weren't quite sure what to expect of it, they showed such interest that we had to close registration early. A questionnaire which students filled out on the final day showed surprise at the extensiveness of the research; a wish, by some, that there had been some "demonstrations" of psychic phenomena in class; and a feeling that they had learned to distinguish better between parapsychology and the "occult." Some said they now realized that this is an important dimension of human nature to be taken seriously.

Do you plan to repeat this another year?

Definitely. Eventually I hope to offer it as an elective during the regular school year. I believe this can be done if the quality of such experimental programs is maintained at a high level. This will be the best way to dispel the skepticism of parapsychology's opponents.

The success of the program encouraged me to offer a summer four-week evening seminar at Ladycliff in June entitled "Current Issues in Psychology," for laymen. It dealt primarily with parapsychology, altered states and death and dying.



MR. REVERS